

CaliforniaTM

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Golden Rush: The Best
California Champagnes

White Money, Black Power:
A Showdown in Oakland

Wild in the Pacific:
California's Islands

THE OTHER MOTHERS

If you can't have
a baby, they'll
do it for you.

By Cynthia Gorney

YOUR BABY
HERE



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ON THE WALL IN MY studio is a large map of the United States, one of those cartographic inserts that fall out of *National Geographic* like a Cracker Jack prize and get stuffed into a drawer with the official Hotchkiss guide to greater downtown Denver. For some reason, I hung this one up. I stare at it whenever I want to ignore the typewriter.

The map is a mosaic of 569 photographs taken by a Landsat satellite from 567 miles above Earth, and it outlines, among other things, the great perplexity of isles, islets, atolls, spits, tongues, necks, capes, harbors, bights, and gunk-holes that characterize our Atlantic seaboard. At the same time, it dramatizes the virtual absence of such configurations along the California, Oregon, and Washington coasts.

The Landsat montage of the western shore is unbroken all the way from the mouth of the Columbia River to San Francisco Bay, a distance of 600 miles. One small blip just off the Point Reyes peninsula marks the Farallones, then nothing for another 300 miles. No Cape Cods, Long Islands, Chesapeake Bays, Georgia Sea Islands. No shoals, no cays, no keys. For nearly 1,000 miles, the seasick sailor will hunt in vain for Pacific shelter.

Below Point Conception, where the mainland looks as though someone had taken a shallow bite out of California's hind end, four gray smudges appear in the Santa Barbara Channel, another four flank the San Pedro Channel, and two more lie about 25 miles off Imperial Beach near the Mexican border. In the satellite's eye they are as ships anchored along a dent in the North

Of the islands scattered off the Southern California coast, Santa Barbara (far right), like Anacapa and San Miguel, belongs to the public; all three are part of the Channel Islands National Park. Santa Rosa (right) remains private property, owned by the Vail & Vickers Cattle Company, which runs 5,000 cattle on it.

WILD

Few and far between, California's coastal islands are precious stones best left unturned.
BY PAGE STEGNER



ISLES



American plate, though from any flight southbound for San Diego they look like what they are, the northernmost in a chain of islands that stretches 500 miles from Point Eugenia in Baja to Point Conception above Santa Barbara—sixteen bleak and battered protrusions of eroded rock, narrow beaches, and swirling mist, varying in size from 134 square miles to a fifth of a square mile.

My Landsat map says nothing about coastal demographics. If it did, the story of offshore occupation in the East would fill volumes, in the West, a page or two. Of the eight islands off the Southern California coast, one (Santa Catalina) hosts a tourist village with a population of about 2,000, two (San Clemente and San Nicolas) belong to the navy, and the remaining five (Santa Barbara, Anacapa, San Miguel, and the privately owned Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz) were designated by Congress in 1980 as the Channel Islands National Park.

Off Northern California, there are just two island formations—tiny Año Nuevo above Monterey Bay, and the Farallones, five granitic rocks, 111 acres in sum, 30 miles due west of San Francisco. Año Nuevo is a California State Reserve, the Farallones a National Wildlife Refuge managed by the Point Reyes Bird Observatory. They, too, belong to you and me.

We will find it difficult, however, to inspect our property should the spirit move us. Navigation around all of California's offshore real estate (except Catalina) can be extremely hazardous; fog, high winds, unpredictable currents, and sudden and severe weather changes all command one's attention. Anchorages and landing sites are minimal and involve, at best, a white-water adventure through breaking surf.

But the major impediments to visitation—suggesting that environmental consciousness is being translated into official policy—are the sharp restrictions on access and activity instituted by the administrators of California's islands. Only biologists and ornithologists are

From the fluid, verdant hills of Santa Rosa (below) to Anacapa's haunting Arch Rock at twilight (right), the grandeur of California's isles endures. The harbor at Santa Catalina (below right) is home to a small flotilla, including many visiting vessels from Los Angeles.



Page Stegner is working with photographer Frans Lanting on a volume for Sierra Club Books about California's offshore islands.



allowed on the Farallones; a few academic and scientific excursions are permitted on Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa, but that's all. Visitors are allowed on National Park Service islands on a limited basis, and even then their movements are strictly circumscribed. Protection of seals and sea lions, birds, endemic plants, and archaeological sites is given top priority by the islands' custodians, and it's a good thing, too. The public track record, even in this isolated environment, hasn't been all that great.

The successive Indian cultures that inhabited the southern islands until as late as 1812 lived in harmony with their water-bound world, having neither the numbers nor the technology to foul it up. But in the 1790s, commercial hunting of the enormous colonies of seals, sea lions, and sea otters began, and over the next century the international slaughter virtually eliminated pinnipeds from the California coast. By the time the International Fur Seal Treaty was signed in 1911, there were precious few left to save. Otter pelts became so rare they fetched \$1,700 per; the Steller's sea lion was harvested, among other reasons, for its whiskers, which made superior pipe cleaners; seal meat made cheap and tasty food for Anglo-Saxon pets.

While the sealers were denuding the shores of marine mammals, sheep ranchers were doing the same to the island fauna. In 1863, a Santa Barbaran named George Nidever purchased San Miguel Island and stocked it with some 6,200 animals, mostly sheep. A three-year dry cycle wiped out 80 percent of his stock, but not before they had wiped out the four-mile-wide, seven-mile-long plateau on which they grazed. Overgrazed. Eighty-five years later another sheep rancher, Herbert Lester, stripped the island of whatever greenery remained, and might have reduced it to a sand dune if the navy hadn't decided to use it as a bombing target and ordered him off. Instead, Lester took his favorite rifle, climbed up a hill overlooking Harris Point, and blew his brains out, but that didn't restore the ground cover.

In varying degrees, the same kind of destruction inflicted on



A few miles north of Monterey, tiny Año Nuevo Island provides a safe rookery for a herd of Steller's seal lions (above). Thirty miles west of San Francisco, along the edge of the continental shelf, one of the five granitic rocks that make up the Farallones shimmers in the Pacific afternoon (below). During the 1800s, on a broad plateau above its hidden coves, San Miguel was home to some 6,000 sheep who quickly stripped the island of its greenery. Today, with its sea-sculpted calcium formations (right), the land resembles a California desert more than a pasture. At Año Nuevo, the lighthouse keeper's home (below right) has long been abandoned.





PHOTOGRAPHED BY HARA (TOP); FRANS LANTING (BOTTOM)

San Miguel has taken place on San Nicolas, Santa Rosa, San Clemente, east Anacapa—anywhere grazing animals were allowed to overpopulate. And on some islands, the job has been advanced by feral pigs rooting up the fragile soil. There are hillsides on Santa Cruz that look as though a madman had run wild over them with a Rototiller.

Almost the only islands to escape the effects of overgrazing were the Farallones, which were barren to begin with. They did not, however, escape exploitation by pre-Sierra Club man, whose 1850s representatives developed a lip-smacking fondness for murre eggs. Between the founding in 1855 of the Farallon Egg Company and 1896, 14 million omelets were gathered on South Farallon (a serious setback for the breeding colony, one assumes).

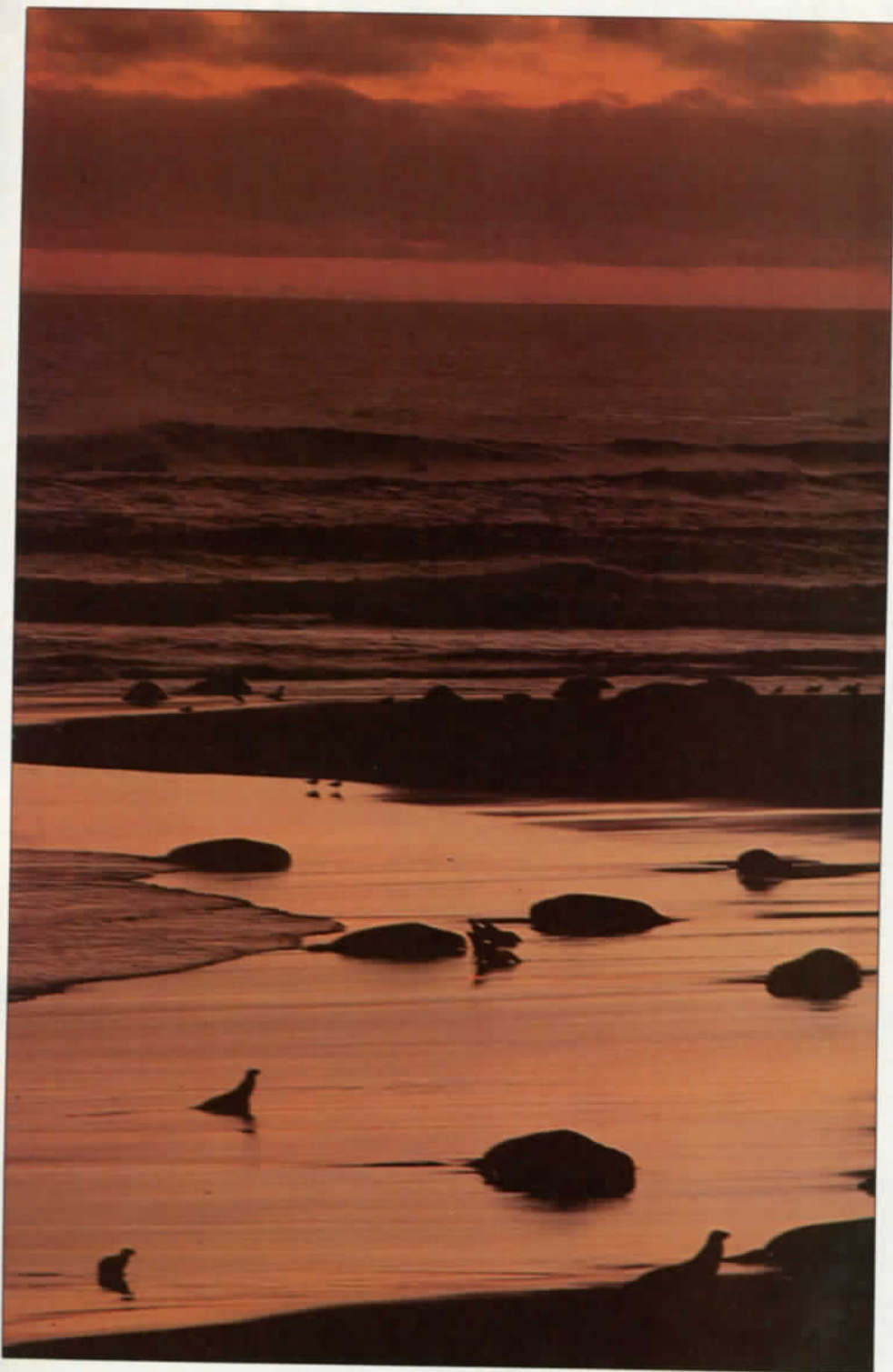
We have come a long way since. Today, aided by such legislation as the Coastal Zone Management Act, marine birds and mammals are making a comeback. Southern sea otters, Guadalupe fur seals, and northern fur seals—all once on the verge of extinction—are now estimated to number about 2,000 each, though none has yet recolonized its former island habitat. And throughout the Channel Islands, there exist stable communities of harbor seals and California sea lions. Not yet cause for celebration, perhaps, but better than extinction.

Possibly the most astonishing resurgence among marine mammals is that of the now ubiquitous elephant seal. Virtually extinct 70 years ago, today its world population totals some 50,000. Standing on the bluff above Point Bennett on San Miguel during the breeding season and looking down on what one might mistake for fat black rocks if there weren't 20,000 of them, all flipping sand in one another's faces, one wonders whether even that figure isn't too low.

Man's fascination with these wild creatures is not reciprocated. The elephant seal is largely indifferent to the presence of man in his midst. But all other pinnipeds are panicked by an incautious approach, and during the subsequent stampede into the water



Santa Cruz's Stanton Ranch (left) belongs to one of two families who own the island in association with the Nature Conservancy. Sunset Beach on San Miguel is blanketed with seals and sea lions (below), evidence of resurgent island life. Orange cup coral (below left) perches on blue sponge.



newborn pups are often crushed or abandoned. Sufficiently disturbed, seals and sea lions abandon breeding areas altogether. So do seabirds.

So it seems not unreasonable to argue that we preserve as they are these few places still unsullied by human development, and that, moreover, we leave their biotic communities to their own devices, not merely unmolested, but unobserved. As in "alone." It is a paradox, to be sure. Federal land is public land—much of it (in the words of the park service mandate) set aside "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." And yet the most sensible assessment of that benefit is to keep the people down, if not out, and to protect the brown pelican, the island night lizard, and the globose dune beetle from the island sightseer and the peregrine snoop.

Unfortunately, post-Sierra Club man is not really convinced that his collective presence in the wilderness is disruptive. (It is estimated that 72,000 of us will visit the Channel Islands National Park this year.) And he seems decidedly unwilling to consider the proposition that there are places on earth where he need not venture at all. Which means that the restraints currently imposed by the government agencies and private individuals controlling most of California's islands are probably the only way to ensure recovery from the sins of the past.

If officialdom continues to resist pressure to reinterpret "benefit and enjoyment of the people" as "comfort, amusement, and entertainment of the people"; if the inclusion of Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa in the Channel Islands National Park doesn't lead to a great network of trails, vista points, and campgrounds; and if all those Fred Harvey-type concessionaires who understand "park" to mean "resort" and think a "wilderness experience" equals eighteen holes before lunch—if they can be kept at bay, then there is hope that our offshore environment will not only survive, but survive in a manner approaching its original condition. Preserve us from more Cape Cods and Siesta Keys. We have enough of those on that other coast. ■